Day Thirty-Six
27 November 1952

Where the Crane School road plunges off Briery Mountain to the Brandonville Turnpike at the Tannery Bridge, Roaring Creek pours out of the upper Gap, a deep slash it cut in the mountain eons ago, and flows northwest in chattering white water parallel with the Turnpike. In 1938 Kay and I hiked along the Turnpike—up and down and back for fourteen miles when it was a sandy summer dirt road. The mountain and Roaring Creek haven’t changed, only the paved surface; the side roads are the incredible same, even now.

On Thanksgiving Day 1952, just five years to the very date after Ruff’s first retrieve in the nearby Gold Mine Rocks, Kay and Ruff and I were rock-hopping the Country Squire station wagon in bone-jarring bumps down the washed-out Crane School road. White streaks in the ghastly rocks of the road showed where somebody’s differential had struck fire like flirt on a frizzled or scraped running boards or bumped fenders on the sides.

The road couldn’t have been much worse when the old log Stanton house stood partway up the mountain. One night John Feather told the tale beside a fox hunters’ campfire.

“Stanton got bit by a ‘coon and caught hydrophobia. He locked a chain ‘round his neck and nailed the other end to a log in the outside house wall so’s he couldn’t give hydrophobia to other people. There he lived, chained outside in all kinds of weather like a dog. If anyone came near him he’d growl and say, ‘Stay away from me, I might bite you.’ The next spring he died and they cut him down and buried him back of the house.”

The old Stanton log house, a small black dot on a top map now, is gone, and so is John Feather and his stories.

Hallway down the awful hill I pulled to a grinding skidding stop near grapevines that looked hunting in far cover on top, but ranging with Kay to take the bottom, I opened the tailgate and had no bones. As I closed it, the hillside and went for the top of the creek.

By the time I pulled my gear dropped in two shells, Ruff was up on a spider in its web, trying not to pole timber with open leaf-cut small hemlocks, I almost missed another one crossing over the Turnpike along Roaring Creek far below the vision of black-barred flank fly.

Kay was waiting for me at the Bridge and we decided to follow stream.

There was almost no bank at this place, only a flat area of swept away soil, leaving a drone, which Ruff was searching. Scrambling over smooth rocks we found Ruff on solid point in a big point at the stream’s edge. When I opened, and I pushed into the reaction. There was a sapling grapevine hanging from its tendril’s at the bottom. Graff hand with the butt resting on a grough and tugged the grapevine like a grouch shot out from under it before I saw it, a low dark street.

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stop rear grapevines that looked too good to pass up. We had been
hunting in fair cover on top, but nothing as promising as this. Ar-
ranging with Kay to take the station wagon and meet me at the
bottom, I opened the tailgate and Ruff slid out as smoothly as if he
had no bones. As I closed it, two grouse flushed from the steep
hillsides and went for the top of the mountain.

By the time I pulled my gun from its scabbard sleeve and had
dropped in two shells, Ruff was on point above me, spread out like
a spider on its web, trying not to roll down the hill. He was in tall
pole timber with open leaf-covered forest floor dotted with a few
small hemlocks. I almost made it up to him as two more grouse
went in the air simultaneously and sailed down the mountainside,
one crossing over the Turnpike, the other disappearing in hemlocks
along Roaring Creek far below, my mental retina retaining the
vision of black-barred flank feathers.

Kay was waiting for me in the station wagon at the Tannery
Bridge and we decided to follow the bird that had gone to the
stream.

There was almost no bank on the right side of Roaring Creek
at this place, only a flat area of creek pebbles where high water had
sweped away the soil, leaving an intermittent fringe of rhododend-
don, which Ruff was searching industriously.

Scrambling over smooth stones that rolled under my boots, I
found Ruff on solid point in a dense green clump of rhododendron
at the stream's edge. When I circled in front of him nothing hap-
pened, and I pushed into the green foliage and waited, with no
reaction. There was a sapling beside me with a single strand of
grapevine hanging from its top and intertwined among the rhodo-
dendron at the bottom. Grasping my gun vertically in my right
hand with the butt resting on my pelvis, I reached up with my left
and tugged the grapevine like a bellpull. It brought service. The
grouse shot out from under Ruff's nose and was over the water
before I saw it, a low dark streak zooming downstream.

We crossed to the left side of Roaring Creek with Kay taking
the tramroad grade, which was clearly evident there, and Ruff and I
worked the cover on the upper side where I guessed the grouse had
gone. It flushed wild this time from the tramroad edge in front of
Kay, and kept going straight down Roaring Creek.
We were a long distance from the original flush on the moun-
tainside and I expected the grouse to make a try to come back
upstream on its next rise, which would be its fourth. At the jun-
tion with the little tributary from the left, which we had hunted
this morning at its crossing high on the Crane School road, I was
sure the bird would be nearby.

Ruff plunged into Roaring Creek in front of me and stopped,
rigid on point in the middle of the stream, facing a wall of rhodo-
dendron eight feet high on the far bank. He was standing in turbu-
lent water below a small waterfall, his head reaching high, his left
paw raised tight against his chest, exactly as Briar pointed years
after him and as Quest points now, and his soul was in his face. I
will never forget his eyes.

I splashed over the slippery stream bed and stopped just down-
stream from him, breathing hard from the tension of the moment,
staring at the mass of rhododendron and trying to cover the corri-
dor of the stream in both directions. Kay was coming out into the
water with her camera, and I waited for her to get the picture,
knowing this grouse had been unpredictable so far with one tight
lie and two quick-triggered flushes. Ruff was immobile except to
roll his eyes and turn his head once while Kay focused her camera,
and I could see his liver-colored nose twist first right, then left,
as he tried to pinpoint the thread of scent. I was getting edgy, waiting
for the sound of the shutter being tripped, and then Kay whispered
that she had already got the picture.

The water of the current was icy against my boots as I took a
step toward the bank, and at my movement Ruff turned his body
downstream, then froze again, headed into the rhododendron. At
times like this, every nerve, every perception is stretched to concert
pitch and rising to the breaking limit. I could smell the rhodo-
dendron foliage that normally has no fragrance, with the temperature
of the sand, the black earth, and the damp air from the water ca-
dating to my face. Rhododendron is unlike any growth any man
has tried to penetrate—a tough interweave of springy branches that
resist attack. I saw one place less dense and inserted my gun barrels
horizontally in front of me and pushed in, forcing my shoulders
and body like a wedge. Steens and long green leaves like some sort
of tropical plant stung my face as I fought through, head down,
knowing I was blowing my chance
minded to flush the grouse to con-
he stood somewhere behind me
steeper than I had estimated, feel-
rels in front of me. I was throw-
edge and was on a sandy shelf
foliage. I crouched there, the
my labored breathing, then a
grouse detonated within feet of
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dendron. He was standing in turbu-
ent head reaching high, his left
shoulder exactly as Briar pointed years
ago and his soul was in his face. I
began to sweat. I was aware of the tension of the moment,
and trying to cover the corri-
dor Kay was coming out into the
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back, green leaves like some sort
of cloud, through, head down,
knowing I was blowing my chance for a shot by going in but deter-
mind to flush the grousce to consummate Ruff’s point. All the while
he stood somewhere behind me and never moved. The bank was
taller than I had estimated and I had to crawl up on my knees,
feeling the wet sand through my pants, trying to keep my gun bar-
rels in front of me. I was through the thickest growth at the water’s
edge and was on a sandy shelf in an opening like a small cave of
foliage. I crouched there, the only sound the one-two, one-two of
my labored breathing, then abandoning caution I stood up. The
grouse detonated within feet of me, boring straight up into a small
piece of sky where my gun barrels found it and I fired, blasting the
quiet of the valley. The grouse hung for a second, spinning, then
dropped vertically back the way it had gone up, falling on Ruff who
must have pushed in at the shot. For a wild moment he and the
grouse rolled down the bank, one on top, then the other, until Ruff
got his footing and pinned the bird under his paw and caught it.

How Kay got through that tangle I never found out, but she
was beside me in time to see Ruff’s retrieve, putting the ultimate
glow on the ceremony of the kill. The grouse was not as large as I
had thought—an adult if rounded primary tips mean anything at all
age; a hen by the unmistakable burnt-orange upper breast marking
and the black breast bars. I was experiencing the feedback of re-
verse as I held the lovely thing in my palm, warm, so game, so
dead. I had to live with it, unless I renounced grouse hunting; this
had been as sporting as any shooting could be, and I accepted my
sin as part of me, and responded to Ruff’s impatience to be off and
hunting, the way my setters have always tempered my guilt neuro-
sis with common sense. It had been a grand piece of action with
superb dog work—three productive points on four consecutive flushes by the same grouse, with one shot that counted, and a
stunning capture and retrieve.

As we drove back the Turnpike, a grouse flushed from near the
Blue Ribbon Pour-Out and crossed in front to land in the top of a
tall bare tree. I stopped the station wagon and we watched it, with
Ruff whining, until it took off toward Roaring Creek. Approaching
Lenox, we stopped again as the sun broke through and illuminated
the contours of Briery Mountain, a reflection of our joy in being
alive. It was Thanksgiving.